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Q&A With Kimbal Musk, Cofounder of Square Roots & Board Director at Tesla, Space X, and Chipotle

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by Craig Shapiro

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Kimbal Musk started his career at Scotiabank. In 1995, he and his brother Elon established an online city guide corporation named Zip2 which was acquired by Compaq Computer in 1999. In the early 2000s, he turned a new page in his career by starting to attend the French Culinary School in New York. He is the cofounder of Square Roots and owner of The Kitchen Cafe, a chain of community restaurants located across the US, and an active board member of Tesla Inc., SpaceX, and Chipotle Mexican Grill.

I recently caught up with him to ask a few questions about his journey.

1. As a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up?

I grew wanting to be an entrepreneur but I didn't tie my purpose to my passion of food for many years. My grandfather was the ultimate explorer and entrepreneur, mapping parts of Southern Africa. He was an incredible inspiration, as was my mother. Entrepreneurship, pioneering, whatever you call it, was built into us from when we were born.

2. If I said the word "mentor" who is the first person to pop into your mind? Why?

I am super fortunate to have many mentors in my life. The mentor that pops into my mind is Sam Dryden. He ran the agriculture division of the Gates Foundation until he passed away prematurely a couple years ago. We had completely opposite views on the future of food. He was one of the founding fathers of GMO seeds and I was all about reconnecting to real food. But it never really came up much in our conversations. He was always a friendly advisor no matter what I was going through. And occasionally I would be able to return the favor. I really appreciate the time that older people in my life have given me and I work hard to do the same for younger people in my life.

3. What inspired you to pursue a career in health/food/environment?

I've cooked since I was 12 years old but did not see it as a business until I was fortunate to cook for the firefighters in 9/11. It was such a profound experience to cook for the first responders for 6 weeks as they would work to save American lives, come in for real food that we cooked that morning, and go right back out into those giant piles of melting metal to find more Americans to help. It taught me the power of real food and the community it brings. After that I just had to open The Kitchen and work in food. A few years later I had a very serious accident that made me appreciate my life more and it accelerated my desire to give back. I started Big Green and it is now the largest food non-profit in the country teaching kids across America science through the growing of food. In 2016, I co-founded Square Roots with Tobias Peggs to empower the next generation of farmers in cities across America.

4. How did you first meet Tobias and how did you guys come up with idea for Square Roots?

Tobias and I have worked together since 2007. He is one of the smartest and authentic people I know. When I learned that he had just sold his company in 2015, I flew to New York to tell him that we need to work together on the incredible opportunity of the future of food. We explored the world together to learn about indoor farming and we were completely taken in by the wonder of what is now possible. We learned about using light to make a strawberry sweeter or more tart, or naturally add vitamin C and D. We had to pick our jaws up off the floor. We worked on how it empower young farmers in our cities and Square Roots came to be!

5. Which public company board have you enjoyed serving on most— Tesla? Chipotle? Be honest! ;-)

Being on a public company board is not my favorite job to be honest. But I have loved the mission of both Tesla and Chipotle so much that I have embraced it. It is incredibly interesting to watch how both companies have been able to literally change their respective industries. I think being public did help the mission somewhat.

6. Do you have a favorite non profit? If so, which one?

Big Green is my favorite non-profit. I am biased because I helped create it. But I believe it is truly one of the most impactful non-profits in the world. We teach kids science through the growing of food in outdoor learning gardens. We're in 600 schools and reach over 300,000 kids every school day.

7. Outside of Square Roots, do you have a favorite Collaborative portfolio company?

I love Outdoor Voices. Their products are exceptional and it comes from the passion of the founder. Tyler Haney is also a fellow Boulderite, so that puts her a step ahead as well. ;)

8. On average, how many hours do you sleep at night?

I like to sleep 9 hours a night. I can sleep 7-8 hours if needed, but don't enjoy my day as much.

**Disclosure: Collaborative Fund is a major investor in Square Roots.*



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